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ABSTRACT

Significant research studies, bibliographies, and selected scholarly papers that have analyzed numerous aspects of illiteracy are examined in this paper. A definition, characteristics, and the plight of illiterates are discussed. The following selected research studies are then reviewed and a brief analysis of each is given: (1) "The Acquisition of Literacy by Children and Adults" (T. G. Sticht); (2) "Ethnographic Research on Word Recognition Strategies of Adult Beginning Readers" (N. Boraks and S. Schumacher); (3) "Outlook for the 80's: Adult Literacy" (L. Y. Mercier); (4) "Adult Literacy: An Annotated Bibliography" (F. E. Kazemek and P. Rigg); and (5) "Adult Literacy Education: Current and Future Directions" (A. Fingeret). In addition, "Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation" by C. S. Hunter and D. Harman, and M. Berube's "Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in Cuban Schools" are discussed. Concluding remarks focus on the implications of these scholarly studies, pointing out that with the wealth of knowledge regarding the behavior and characteristics of illiterates, the United States and its educational system are in a position to do more for the illiterate population than has been done in the past. (JD)

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Abstract

This paper presents significant research studies, bibliographies, and selected scholarly papers that have been developed to analyze numerous aspects of illiteracy. An emphasis is given to reading problems. A definition, characteristics, and the plight of illiterates are discussed. Selected research studies are reviewed and a brief analysis given of each. Concluding remarks attempt to state the implications of these scholarly studies.

What Happens to People Who Cannot Read?

The Problem of Illiteracy

For many years Jonathan Kozol has been writing on the topics of illiteracy and systematic educational problems. In his most recent book, Illiterate America (1985), he states that 25 million American adults cannot read poison warnings on a can of pesticide; they cannot read a letter from their child's teacher, or the front page of a newspaper.¹ According to Kozol an additional 35 million adults (functionally illiterates) read below the level needed to function successfully in our society. Kozol also points out the United States ranks forty-ninth among 158 member nations of the United Nations in literacy and wastes over \$100 billion annually as a result.²

In 1975 Jim Cates of the University of Texas completed the Adult Performance Level of literacy, a four year study funded by the Federal government. He found 20 percent of the adult population to be illiterate; 63 million, according to Cates are marginally incompetent. Some believe Cates' illiteracy study is one of the most comprehensive ever accomplished.³ The Adult Performance Level survey produced the most widely cited figure for the extent of illiteracy in the United States: 23 million Americans.

The 1970 Survival Literacy Study and the 1971 follow-up study conducted by Louis Harris and Associates reported 18.5 million people 16 years of age and older were functionally illit-

erate (13 percent of the adult population). Literacy was defined as the ability to fill out application forms for such common items as a Social Security number, a bank loan, Medicaid, and a driver's license.⁴

In 1979 a Census Bureau study said a .5 percent of the adult population is illiterate. The study defines literate adults as people over age 14 who have only completed the fifth grade.

In 1980 the Adult Performance Level Study from 1975 was extrapolated to indicate that 74 million people are marginally incompetent or worse.

In May of 1986 the Department of Education released a Census Bureau study, based on a 1982 test, stating 17 to 21 million adults (13 percent of the adult population) are illiterate.⁵

It may be difficult to get consensus on numbers of illiterates or functional illiterates in this country, but we do know what happens to people who cannot read. They become eligible to be counted in the illiterate category, and their lives are apt to be economically and socially restrained.

About 96 percent of the total adult, illiterate world population (850 million people) live in Third World countries. In Africa well over 60 percent of the population is illiterate, and in Asia over 50 percent are illiterate. Sometimes the choice of a literate language can be difficult. In India 1,549 separate languages or dialects are spoken.⁶

Recognition of the illiterates' plight is currently a topic of considerable interest in this country. Recently (September

1986) the American Broadcasting Company and the Public Broadcasting Service began a 12-month campaign called Project Literacy U.S. to promote literacy awareness. This effort follows a two-year advertising campaign (1984-1986) by a coalition of 11 literacy organizations. However, it has taken us some time to recognize and be sensitive to this national problem.

Fifty years ago John Steinbeck was doing careful research for his popular novel, The Grapes of Wrath. This book describes the deplorable conditions of displaced dust bowl farmers and illiterate, migrant farm laborers without work. Although The Grapes of Wrath was a number-one best seller in 1939 and remained among top book sellers for the following year, public reaction of this problem remained skeptical. Many were inclined to believe Steinbeck's material was exaggerated, if not deliberately falsified, as part of a plot to defame either California or the nation. "One rumor that gained great currency among conservatives and farmers in California was that Steinbeck was a Jew who was acting for Zionist-communist interests in deliberately trying to undermine the economy."⁷

Over the years, minority groups have been significantly overrepresented within illiterate, poverty categories. For blacks, 33 percent were in poverty in 1970, and 34 percent were in poverty in 1984, compared to 10 percent and 11 percent respectively for whites.⁸ Langston Hughes, the talented, black poet, has written numerous poems that reflect the attitudes of downtrodden minorities. Two of his poems, "Border Line" and "Me and the Mule", are

examples of Hughes' talent, and they represent some latent frustrations of depressed minority groups.

Border Line

I used to wonder
About living and dying --
I think the difference lies
Between tears and crying.

I used to wonder
About here and there --
I think the distance
Is nowhere.

Me and the Mule

My old mule,
He's got a grin on his face
He's been a mule so long
He's forgot about his race.

I'm like that old mule --
Black -- and don't give a damn!
You got to take me
Like I am.⁹

The United Nations' sponsored Experimental World Literacy Program has found that victims of illiteracy all over the world have similar characteristics. Illiterates are adversely affected by problems that go hand-in-hand with poverty. They also have limited access to goods and services, and difficulty engaging in political processes.¹⁰

Jeanne S. Chall has published a useful article titled,

"Literacy: Trends and Explanations", that attempts to define literacy in this country.¹¹ Chall explains the criteria for literacy has changed and continues to change. For instance the definition of literacy has changed from an ability to write one's name to an ability to use reading for daily functioning (a fourth-grade reading level was thought adequate during World War II and was changed to an eighth grade level). During World War II, 16 million Americans over 20 years old were found unable to read at a fourth-grade level.¹² John B. Carroll and Jeanne Chall's National Academy of Education report on reading, titled Toward a Literate Society (1975), suggests a twelfth-grade reading level is essential.¹³ Chall has comments on a wide universe of literacy problems from early childhood learning to adult illiteracy. She believes about 10-15 percent of children and adults have severe difficulty in learning to read.¹⁴

Ronald M. Cervero has reviewed and analyzed definitions of illiteracy and functional literacy and concludes that one common definition is not always adequate. He closes his article, "Is A Common Definition of Adult Literacy Possible?" with this thought: "The question, then, is not whether there is a need for a common definition of literacy, but rather whose needs will be served."¹⁵ Cervero has done an adequate job reviewing well-known definitions of literacy and functional literacy.

One of the most comprehensive monographs on the history of literacy and readers has been written by Carl F. Kaestle.¹⁶ This analysis discusses the shift from oral to written cultures. For

many centuries after the introduction of Greek alphabetic writing, literacy was restricted to a small elite and limited to a few functions, chiefly religion, accounting, genealogy, and sometimes political administration.¹⁷ Keastle believes the uses of literacy have not been the subject of much historical study, but they are numerous and varied. He quotes Princeton, historian Lawrence Stone as saying, "If you teach a man to read the Bible, he may also read pornography or seditious literature."¹⁸ Kaestle has an excellent review of literature along with his scholarly presentation.

Characteristics of Illiterates

Recent attention to the problem of illiteracy has produced some excellent reports focusing on: characteristics, research projects, specific reading strategies that might be helpful with adults, and available resources for literacy programs. One effort by the Federal government titled the National Adult Literacy Project was launched by the President in September 1983.¹⁹ The Department of Education funded scholarly literature reviews and some research through the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development and the Network of Innovative Schools. Four thoughtful reports have been produced to address literacy issues:

- 1) "Adult Illiterates and Adult Literacy Programs:
A Summary of Descriptive Data" by Janet McGrail
provides a current literature review.²⁰ McGrail
states that groups with high rates of illiteracy
are:

- a) The old
- b) Minority groups
- c) The poor
- d) The unemployed and those employed at low-skill jobs
- e) Residents of the South and rural areas²¹

Direct Federal support for adult literacy has been provided primarily by the Adult Education Act of 1966. McGrail reviews active, significant literacy efforts to include military, business and industry, and academic programs. Each is subdivided to identify program characteristics and participant characteristics.²²

2) "Guidebook for Effective Literacy Practice, 1983-1984."

by David P. Crandall, et al., is designed to expose effective literacy practices.²³ This study examines administrative structures of literacy programs as well as program components such as:

- a) Student recruitment
- b) Orientation
- c) Counseling
- d) Diagnostic testing
- e) Instructional methods and materials
- f) Assessment
- g) Follow-up
- h) Program evaluation²⁴

- 3) "Research and Development Agenda" by Kathleen Phillips, et al. is a literature survey organized into seven topics:

- a) Unique attributes of adult beginning readers
- b) Learner diagnosis and assessment
- c) Staff training
- d) Impact of literacy programs
- e) Teacher characteristics and methodologies
- f) Technology
- g) Literacy development in other countries²⁵

Phillips has an excellent bibliography with 82 citations from prominent authorities.

- 4) "Television Technologies in Combating Illiteracy" by Barbara A. Marchilonis considers the use of television in literacy programs.²⁶ This monograph is quite well done. Marchilonis' report states "...we believe that for the vast number of illiterate or functionally illiterate citizens, the media have an unmotivating or narcotic effect, allowing those citizens to tolerate their condition."²⁷

Margaret Robinson has written a final report on the National Adult Literacy Project.²⁸ Her Chapter III contains a compendium of demographic and statistical information on adult literacy characteristics. These National Adult Literacy reports should be quite useful for anyone interested in what happens to people who cannot read.

Other significant reports on literacy include:

- 1) "The Acquisition of Literacy by Children and Adults" by Thomas G. Sticht.²⁹ Here Sticht presents some studies which suggest learning to understand language by eye as skillfully as by ear may take several years after the initial decoding has been mastered. Sticht has done numerous studies for the military to analyze reading skills.

- 2) "Ethnographic Research on Word Recognition Strategies of Adult Beginning Readers" by Nancy Boraks and Sally Schumacher was sponsored by the Department of Education.³⁰ The study attempts to identify reading strategies which facilitated or inhibited progress of adult beginning readers (ABR). Boraks and Schumacher found that most adult reading instruction is based on methods developed for children beginning to read. Studies by Monroe (1932) and Boraks (1978) are claimed to be the only works available that provide specific information of ABR's use of reading cues.³¹ A discussion of each study is provided. Boraks found that ABR's tended to use semantic cues less than children and did not have the same pattern of using graphic/phonemic cues found in children. Also reported is that different word recognition and comprehension strategies are used by children who read well when compared to those who read poorly. Adults

are less likely to try new approaches to reading because of: long standing habits, concern with failure, and a tendency not to involve their self-esteem in learning. This study by Boraks and Schumacher has a strong bibliography.

- 3) "Outlook for the 80's: Adult Literacy" by Lorraine Y. Mercier presents four papers on literacy issues.³² The attempt is to define the literacy problem in this country. The study was sponsored by the Department of Education through Dingle Associates in Washington, D.C. When reviewing behavior characteristics of illiterates it was found that only two percent of illiterates attend classes.
- 4) "Adult Literacy: An Annotated Bibliography" by Francis E. Kazemek and Pat Rigg presents some of the most current writings on adult literacy.³³ They are in the form of journal articles, books, and ERIC documents. This is an excellent annotated bibliography, and it is organized in five sections:
 - a) State of adult literacy in the United States and internationally.
 - b) Ways of looking at literacy.
 - c) Critiques of current philosophical assumptions about literacy.
 - d) Literacy related research.
 - e) Teaching methods.³⁴

Karen Griswold also has a good annotated bibliography consisting of seven publications on literacy, 16 on reading, and 14 on writing.³⁵

- 5) "Adult Literacy Education: Current and Future Directions" by Arlene Fingeret was sponsored by the Department of Education.³⁶ Using a review of literature, this paper identifies individually oriented literacy programs. According to Fingeret, the sociocultural characteristics of American illiterate adults are presented. She said one of the major forces behind efforts to define literacy is the desire of policy makers to count illiterate adults. Fingeret believes social and behavioral science research on literacy and the nature of reading processes makes for confusion. "Broad issues and the aspects of literacy and reading that do not fall clearly into one of the disciplinary domains often are not addressed..."³⁷ Fingeret thinks schema theory holds promise for adults by placing emphasis on specific aspects of literacy instruction such as: utilizing pre-existing knowledge and experience, setting purposes for reading, and asking appropriate questions before and after reading.³⁸ A good analysis of schema theory for adults is presented. Characteristics that illiterates bring with them are identified as: fear of failure, low self-esteem and self-confidence, resistance to change and

lack of future orientation, inarticulateness, fatalism, inability to cope or to think abstractly, and apathy. Her bibliography contains 150 citations, and it's quite good.³⁹

One of the most frequently quoted literacy studies in the professional literature is Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation by Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman (1975).⁴⁰ In 1984 Francis Kazemek and Pat Rigg said Hunter and Harman's work is the most comprehensive study of illiteracy in the United States to date.⁴¹ Hunter and Harman have examined four areas:

- 1) What is adult illiteracy?
- 2) Who are adult illiterates?
- 3) What is being done about adult illiteracy?
- 4) What should be done about adult illiteracy?

Their central recommendation is to establish community based initiatives to serve the most disadvantaged segments of our population.

In a summary of his Ford Foundation report, Carman St. John Hunter said demands of mass education today, with bureaucratic, legal, technological, and economic complexities, require competence far beyond simple literacy.⁴² In the 17th and 18th centuries (where 90% of the population became literate; i.e., they could sign their names and read simple passages) the motive for mass education was to make good citizens. Citizens in today's environment are at a distinct disadvantage if they cannot read, write, and do some

mathematical calculations. Reading is not just important, it has become a vital survival skill. Hunter has classified illiterates into four socioeconomic groups, which for him are more important factors than educational level:

- 1) High school dropouts who fully share values of the dominant cultural group. They lack credentials, and this is their big problem. Census data indicates 34% of public school dropouts are not enrolled in any school and not in the labor force. Fourteen percent of high school graduates are not in college and not in the labor force.⁴³
- 2) People in this classification leave public school earlier than the first group, yet belong to social groups where literacy is taken for granted.
- 3) Persons who suffer multiple deprivations and are found in the inner city or in rural poverty areas.
- 4) Persons in this group have just about given up believing that anything they can do will make a difference. They are hardcore stationary poor.⁴⁴

In conclusion Hunter reasons that cultivation of human competence results when people are empowered to exercise greater control over their own lives.

One immensely successful literacy campaign is Cuba's effort to educate it's population since Fidel Castro's Revolution of 1961. The Cuban Literacy Campaign has been used as a model for

Nicaragua's current literacy efforts. Jonathan Kozol wrote of Cuba's literacy campaign in 1978, Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools.⁴⁵ A recent report on Cuba's educational system was made by Maurice Berube based on his May 1983 visit to Cuba.⁴⁶

Berube has an interesting, well written account of Cuba's successful literacy efforts. According to Berube, Cuba is creating a school system sufficiently effective to place it in the category of a developed nation. Jose' R. Fernandez, minister of education and hero of the Revolution, was available to Berube for discussions. Fernandez said there are two categories of problems that still plague Cuba; they are problems of material (lack of equipment) and human deficiencies relating to quality (teacher preparation and involvement of parents).

Cuba appears to be successful in the Literacy Campaign at the elementary level and, increasingly, at the intermediate level. "Variables that coincide with U.S. research findings are high teacher expectations and significant parental involvement."⁴⁷ In Cuba, children have the same teacher for the first four years; Berube believes the United States should consider such a system. Furthermore, Berube recommends the United States:

- 1) Create effective school models (especially for the poor).
- 2) Create national urban student and parental organizations as Cuba has done. Parents are encouraged to become volunteers in Cuban schools.

3) Create a national educational system to provide uniform leadership.

4) Eliminate poverty. Most of Havana's slums have been eliminated.⁴⁸

In this country we do not have a single authority for total educational policy. Even when dealing with prisoners (over 60% of the half million state and Federal inmates are illiterate), it is difficult to mandate literacy.⁴⁹ The state of Virginia has proposed that no prisoner be released until a literacy test can be passed. But a prisoner's legal rights and the policy of state and Federal penal institutions must be considered in a free society.

One encouraging sign in this country's recent efforts to combat illiteracy (reading deficiencies in particular) is the number of volunteer agencies willing to mobilize their talents. Libraries are a good example as well as schools, state and local governments, community agencies, businesses, and industry. Libraries focus on coordinating and providing adult literacy services at the community level.⁵⁰ Yet in some states there are waiting lines to get into adult basic education classes. Evelyn Wolf and Catherine Kavanagh have a good paper explaining adult literacy services that might be found in a library.⁵¹

Recruiting adequate volunteer tutors is a most difficult task. Without trained, experienced professionals to direct reading programs, they probably will flounder. Funding for professional staff and materials remains a serious problem within many well

intentioned volunteer programs. The two largest national volunteer organizations tutoring adults in reading and English as a second language are Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America.⁵²

Research

There are numerous studies identifying personality factors and other characteristics of adult basic education students. Alienation, avoidance, hostility toward authority, withdrawal, violent aggression, fear of schools, self-image as an illiterate, rejection of the desire to develop intellectually, and rigid value systems are debilitating personality factors found.⁵³ In most cases illiterates must break through concepts of defeat, desperation, and despair in order to achieve.

Children from low income families are particularly vulnerable to a deceleration of reading progress after the primary grades. Chall believes a major break seems to be about grade four. Prior to grade four an oral tradition is found; the text rarely goes beyond language and knowledge a young reader already has acquired through listening, T.V., or direct experience. Beyond grade four a literacy tradition is started; here reading material goes beyond what is already known. Materials typically read at grade four and beyond change in content, in linguistic complexities, and in cognitive demands.⁵⁴

Karl L. Alexander's, et al., study comparing high school drop-outs to high school graduates demonstrates that cognitive performance is definitely improved by staying in school.⁵⁵ Alexander

observed that dropping out of school has its most severe negative effects on disadvantaged students. Culturally disadvantaged dropouts are apt to find themselves in the functionally illiterate category.

D. R. Garrison reports on dropouts in adult basic education courses and finds that self-confidence is a good discriminator between persisters and dropouts.⁵⁶ Another finding is that adult handicapped learners appear to set unrealistic occupational goals. This finding is consistent with previously reported characteristics of educationally handicapped, low socioeconomic groups.⁵⁷ Mark Blaug has observed that better educated people are generally more flexible, more motivated, better at problem solving, and more productive.⁵⁸ Flexibility has been identified by McDonald and Zimny as one of two primary ingredients in effective reading (the other ingredient is comprehension).⁵⁹ Promoting self-image and flexibility requires considerable individual attention from a dedicated instructor.

Rosemarie J. Park found that adults often fail to make adequate progress in reading comprehension. One explanation offered for this failure is a lack of abstract conceptual categories necessary for understanding advanced text. Park also mentions that research with adult basic readers is limited.⁶⁰

Ronald R. Powell, et al., have reported on how childhood socialization might affect adult reading and library use.⁶¹ Their study indicates the importance of social learning and parents as primary agents in the development of reading and library use. Of

particular importance were childhood factors:

- 1) Whether the respondent read frequently as a child.
- 2) At what age the respondent began using the library.
- 3) Degree to which the parents read.
- 4) With whom the respondent started using the library.⁶²

These findings from Powell are similar to previously reported characteristics of individuals who read frequently compared to non-readers.⁶³

Consistent with other studies, B. F. Kiker and Julia A. Heath have found family background variables to exert significant indirect effects on earnings.⁶⁴ Education was found to be a much more important determinant of black earnings than white earnings. Parental income and level of education exert the strongest effects on reducing the black-white earnings differential.

An interesting study of illiterate adults was conducted by Arlene Fingeret to record their perspectives.⁶⁵ Forty-three, illiterate adults in a medium size, northeast, urban setting were interviewed for two hours. Additional interviews with parents, spouses, siblings, children, friends, and neighbors were also conducted. Illiterate adults in this study identified a risk connected with learning to read and write. They didn't want to be alienated from their network of friends and associates. Illiterate adults understand that their network relationships will shift when they learn to read. Fingeret presents this analysis to educators as a concern that must be addressed within literacy programs.

In a study of individuals with low educational attainment (132 urban black men and women, aged 60 to 94) Marsel A. Heisel found self-perceived reading proficiency to be the best predictor of learning activity.⁶⁶ Heisel said, "It is possible that in a population with very low educational attainment, the habit of learning is not fostered so much by grade level completed or intermittent periods of adult education, but rather by a positive concept of oneself as a learner."⁶⁷

Gordon C. Godbey and Iran C. Mohsenin did a study for the state of Pennsylvania to determine the impact of their adult basic education (ABE) program.⁶⁸ Two hundred forty nine former adult students that enrolled in ABE programs in 1974, 1976 and 1978 were interviewed via telephone. Over half of the sample was under 35 years old. It was consistently reported that most participants read all or part of a newspaper every day. Writing usage did not approach that of reading and was confined to short notes or letters. Each year's former students had a high percentage indicating improved self-esteem as a major effect. The 1974 students were more likely to be registered voters, and the 1978 students were more likely to have obtained a General Education Development certificate.

Implications

People who cannot read are often viewed as restraints on society's economic growth (in dynamic societies as well as developing countries). It is quite difficult for illiterates to be productive in industrial nations; indeed they often require

institutional care (food, shelter, and special treatment). A shortage of skilled labor can result from an illiteracy problem. In this country the population of males and females in their prime producing years (45-54) has gone down from 11.4 percent in 1960 to 9.5 percent in 1984.⁶⁹ Fifteen percent of this group may be illiterate in a relative sense. Meaning their reading skills are not adequate to hold skilled or semi-skilled jobs. In order to make sure an adequate work force is available, nations find it in their best interest to attack illiteracy. In most cases illiterates also benefit through enhanced economic opportunities, better self-esteem, and a higher social status.

Cuba's mobilization to eliminate illiteracy is probably the reason that society has been able to maintain it's stability and self-esteem in spite of severe economic hardships. Eric Hoffer has commented: "There is little doubt that the frustration engendered by unemployment is due more to a corrosive sense of worthlessness than to economic hardship."⁷⁰ Nations may develop internal strength by keeping their citizens literate and employed. Nicaragua appears to be following Cuba's educational policy to strengthen their government.

In this country we have a wealth of knowledge regarding the behavior and characteristics of illiterates. And we are in a position to do much more for our illiterate population than has been done in the past. Qualified instructors for our literacy programs could be improved in quantity and quality. This problem may require additional resources from state and Federal governments.

Private groups have volunteer instructors with the best of intentions, but they frequently lack training and subject matter knowledge from professional educators. Instructors need considerable knowledge of remedial reading techniques along with experience in adult, illiterate characteristics.

What happens to people who cannot read is related to a nation's educational policy. A dynamic, literate nation should be able to significantly help its illiterate population. Another important question to consider is: What happens to a nation that does not help its illiterate population? Cuba for instance has not waited to find out.

An educated world community of citizens will be in a better position to deal with serious national and international problems. Our communications skills (reading and writing) keep us informed, and they serve as a sophisticated but necessary means for survival. Since we now live in a world armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, a high level of communications is essential at all levels of literacy.

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